

MATERIAL TRACES: TIME AND THE GESTURE
IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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Francis Alÿs, Christopher Braddock,
Heather Cassils, Juliana Cerqueira Leite,
Andrew Dadson, Alexandre David,
Paul Donald, Alicia Frankovich, Flutura
& Besnik Haxhillari (The Two Gullivers),
Mark Igloliorte, Tricia Middleton,
Alex Monteith, Angel Vergara

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MATERIAL TRACES: PROCESS, MATTER, AND INTERRELATIONALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART – Amelia Jones

In a well-established narrative of contemporary art in the Western European and North American contexts, after gestural abstraction swept the Western art world just after WWII, artists from the late 1950s onward began progressively to detach art from materiality. The rise of conceptual or “idea” art in particular, but also of performance, video, and other hybrid forms, confirmed a desire to critique the modernist obsession with “form” and a shift towards what art critic Lucy Lippard in 1973 famously called the “dematerialization of art.”¹

The dematerialization in the 1960s and 1970s, however, was never full or complete and, in fact, one could argue that the interest in dematerialization actually pointed to a fascination or obsession with the material world both within and beyond the concerns of “art” *per se*. Working to challenge the conservative formalism attached to Abstract Expressionism and other mid-twentieth-century movements, artists in the 1960s and 1970s still grappled with and explored the limits of an anti-formalist materiality – particularly a materiality of the body, of industrial and post-industrial substances such as steel and Plexiglas, of new media forms such as video installation, and of the immediate social world. In fact the turn from materiality was more definitive from the early 1980s through the 1990s, a period in which dominant contemporary art practices in major Western art world centers did move more towards abstract concepts of critique,

1. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (1973; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Lippard's concept has emerged recently as a key interest in rethinking narratives of contemporary art from this period. Vincent Bonin and Catherine Morris have curated a show with an

accompanying catalogue, both entitled *Materializing “Six Years”*: Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art, Brooklyn Museum (2012); and see also the book Ileana Parvu, ed., *Objet en process. Après la dematerialization de l'art 1960-2010* (Geneva: MetisPresses, 2012).

often implemented through appropriated imagery or objects that lacked "material" interest for artists and viewers. While expressionist paintings from Italy and Germany sold well in the marketplace in the 1980s, and were valued for their supposed "gestural" authority, the reigning art world interest, particularly in Anglo-American art criticism and art practices from centers such as New York and London, was in conceptual or "idea" art, and in the appropriation and reuse of pre-fabricated objects, images, and texts. Paradigmatic of this dematerialized work were the appropriated or industrially produced objects of artists such as Jeff Koons and Sherrie Levine and the text-image pieces or appropriated photographic pieces of feminist artists such as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Cindy Sherman.²

Material Traces focuses on a new shift since the late 1990s back to a strong concern with materiality and with the traces of the activity of making art. In the past decade, artists have shown a strong interest in returning to hybrid modes of creativity that were developed in the 1960s and 1970s, but with a consciousness of the critical thinking and political emphases of conceptually driven works from the 1980s and 1990s. *Material Traces* presents a selection of this work from the past decade by mid-career artists (largely in their 30s and 40s) from Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain – key sites of this new development. Foregrounding the *process of making*, and drawing on the legacy of performative, hybrid, "intermedial," concept- and process-driven practices from the 1960s and 1970s, these works were produced through various modes of wres-

2. Technically, Cindy Sherman does not appropriate actual photographs. However, in the important *Untitled Film Stills* series of around 1980, her poses and the situations depicted are appropriated from classic Hollywood films.

tling with materiality (obvious substances such as wood, paint, or even their own bodies) or through exploiting the specific ontological properties of a medium such as video (which might otherwise seem immaterial). They convey the signs of their own fabrication to present and future viewers.

Fluxus artist Dick Higgins crystallized the idea of hybrid art media or strategies in his 1966 essay on "intermedia," which designated art practices that play on "immediacy," emphasizing "the dialectic between media" in forging an art that communicates with future viewers.³ Similarly, the work in *Material Traces* stresses the interrelational or dialogical bonds between art makers and viewers (or, it is tempting to use the term "experiencers," as often these art works call upon multi-sensorial experience in soliciting the visitor to the gallery or public space where they are displayed). The works call forth the process and embodied inter-subjectivity of the artistic encounter in the act of *viewing*, *participating in*, and *interpreting* the work in its various ongoing manifestations, thus connecting past acts of making to present and future meanings.

Most dramatically, what defines this kind of practice showcased in *Material Traces* is that it puts in material and visual (or even aural) form signs of *having been made*, encouraging subsequent viewers to become aware of the conditions, strategies, and even in some cases emotive contexts of its original production (including bodily action, other less embodied forms of labor, and aspects of the work's construction and dissemination). Importantly, by stressing *making*, these practices point to political issues in relation to the valuing (or devaluing) of artistic labor by

3. See Dick Higgins, "Statement on Intermedia," accessed 26 November 2012, <http://www.artpool.hu/Fluxus/Higgins/intermedia2.html>.

the art market, where the systems of assessment both depend upon artistic labor and eradicate any but the most mystifying of its signs (the marketplace must repress the fact that art, even "pure" conceptual art, has to be in some fashion thought up, constructed, elaborated, engaged with, interpreted – by artist and subsequent experiencers – in order for its commodity value to be secured). If abstract expressionism was lauded for its connection between emotional states, labor, and an "emotionally charged" final product (which, the modernist formalist myth went, were transferred directly via the forms of the work to a discerning, disinterested critic to validate), the text/image works of artists such as Kruger explicitly sought to eradicate such visible traces of artistic labor as part of their feminist critique of the links between formalist conceits of expressivity and male authority.

Again, in terms of these questions of value and the marketplace, the works in *Material Traces* return to concerns of the 1960s and 1970s and to the critical insights of the 1980s and 1990s. The hybrid, process-based works from this earlier period had often explicitly foregrounded the laboring body as a key visible (and sometimes audible) aspect of the work – such as in the multi-media body art works of Carolee Schneemann or Vito Acconci. While Schneemann publicly enacted the labor of painterly creation and aspects of female embodiment in works such as the 1963 performance and installation *Eye Body*, Acconci, in his 1971 performance and video installation *Claim*, explicitly marked the relationship between artist and spectator as one of potential violence, as brokered through the commercial space of the gallery. (In *Claim*, the artist positioned himself in a

basement stairwell of a gallery in New York shrieking at gallery-goers and threatening them with a metal pipe, all simultaneously recorded and played upstairs in the gallery via a video monitor to confront the actual visitors).⁴

Schneemann and Acconci produced works that thus epitomize the surfacing of the making body in this earlier period, and the way in which this surfacing insists upon the intersubjectivity through which art is made and – in the future – given meaning by other “laboring” bodies/subjects. The works in *Material Traces* also surface artistic labor in a way that demands some kind of acknowledgment from the visitor or interpreter that he or she is involved or complicit in determining the meaning of the work through interpretive “labor,” a strategy clear in the earlier works and often motivated explicitly by political concerns such as those of feminism in the case of Schneemann. The foregrounding of the intersubjective (or interrelational) circuits through which art is produced, positioned, valued, and given meaning is itself a strategy with sharp political potential, in that it encourages an awareness of these systems that position the work historically and economically.

This foregrounding is intimately linked to the vicissitudes of time, exposing the fact that art begs the question of the *durationality* or flux and contingency of all experience.⁵ While the performance artwork is received in a present tense (albeit always receding into the past), even works such as *Eye Body* are subject to the passage of time in being understood historically. And, other than with performance artworks, all other works of art are explicitly made in a different temporal framework from their reception and engagement. At issue with the works of *Material*

4. For a description of the work, see “Claim Excerpts/Vito Acconci,” Electronic Arts Inter-mix, accessed 26 November 2012, <http://www.eai.org/title.htm?id=1521>.

5. On durationality, which involves embodied memory, see Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the*

Immediate Data of Consciousness (1889). Translated by F.L. Pogson as *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (London: George Allen and Co., 1913; Boston: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005).

Traces is the explicit opening up of the relationship between the artist and future viewers or experiencers. As with practices such as Acconci's and Schneemann's, the pieces exhibited in *Material Traces* call forth the interrelation between the material world and the perceptual meanings we make from this world as we pass through and inhabit it. In doing so they foreground (through their specific materiality) the fact that making and experiencing art are always social, interrelational, dialogical practices, always in process and taking place over time.⁶

This foregrounding of process through material forms of various media has a strong political potential. By activating future viewers, these works can create historical bonds with past contexts and agents, and thus might elicit political thought – that is, critical thinking about either explicit political concerns or implicitly political phenomenological questions of how we engage with art, culture, or other subjects – in the present.

Engaging the Works

The works exhibited in *Material Traces* stand out for their intermediality (their use of multiple strategies and media to open up the circuits of making, displaying, viewing and making meaning), but also their engagement of other strategies central to the 1960s and 1970s precedents, which tended to begin with materiality if only to "dematerialize" it, in the well-known art historical terms that, as noted, were articulated by Lippard, most fully in her 1973 *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. As Lippard provocatively

6. To some degree the work thus falls into the category of what curator Nicolas Bourriaud in 1995 termed "relationality," but, while Bourriaud more or less erases the historical work that pioneered relationality in the 1960s and 1970s in his now famous book entitled *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 1998),

I see this work as a crucial set of precedents for the more recent trend.

argues, the premise of "allowing materials rather than systems to determine the form of their work," such as process art,

was soon applied to such ephemeral materials as time itself, space, non-visual systems, situations, unrecorded experience, unspoken ideas, and so on./ Such an approach to physical materials led directly to a similar treatment of perception, behavior, and thought processes *per se*.⁷

The more recent work that explores the limits of materiality, such as that included in *Material Traces*, expands this definition of materializing even the "immaterial" (such as the concept or aspects of behavior) through a range of strategies, including: interrogating the ontological bases of the material means of making the work (whether "natural" materials such as wood, or the pixels and light- and time-based structures of digital video); referencing the "having been made" of the work of art, thus opening to future viewers of the work by offering them the possibility of imagining a body actively creating in the past; explicitly opening out and even exaggerating durational processes *within* the work but also *between* the work and the future viewers.

I have already suggested a chronological framework for the tendency to materialize the trace, noting that it has emerged over the past decade from several earlier strands, and it is important to note that some artists, such as Schneemann and Mira Schor, have consistently produced a materially rich, process-based prac-

7. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, ix-x, and 5. Lippard, having been based in New York during the 1960s and 1970s, also erroneously, to my mind, defines conceptualism as having singularly "emerged from Minimalism," implying that it had no other sources or

origins, even as she acknowledges the key role of political activism. Myriad other sources contributed to the rise of idea art, as is particularly clear if one looks beyond New York as the sole center for its articulation. On the interrelation of activism, conceptual art, and performance in 1960s and 1970s Los Angeles art,

see my essay "Lost Bodies: Los Angeles Performance Art in Art History," *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California, 1970-1983*, ed. Peggy Phelan (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 115-184.

tice since their emergence as artists (Schneemann in the early 1960s and Schor in the early 1970s). Geographically, in my extensive research for the show I found these strategies to be most prevalent among artists working in Western Europe, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, although the boundaries separating national or continental art trends have become so blurred that such distinctions may have little meaning – implicating, for example, Canadian trends with those in the USA, as artists travel back and forth across the 49th parallel. Thus, it is worth noting that there are several artists represented in the show who have migrated to the USA from places such as Canada (Heather Cassils) and Brazil (such as Juliana Cerquiera Leite), and to Germany from New Zealand (Alicia Frankovich) or to Quebec from New Zealand (Paul Donald); also represented is the work of Europeans who now practice in countries other than their own places of origin, such as Francis Alÿs (from Belgium, now working in Mexico), Flutura and Besnik Haxhillari or the Two Gullivers (from Albania, now working in Quebec), and Angel Vergara (from Spain, now working in Belgium). Perhaps these lived experiences of the displacements put in play by the forces of globalization (including those of the art world) are a key aspect driving these creative experiments with materiality – enacting the traces of making in overt ways might just be connected to negotiating issues of diaspora and the richness but also potential tensions of navigating cultural and linguistic overlaps and divides. More “hybrid” locations and life-trajectories might call for hybrid and intermedial yet embodied and materializing strategies of making.

Having lived since his initial move from New Zealand to Australia in the late 1990s in a more or less diasporic condition (he moved to the UK in 2007 and to Montreal in 2010), Paul Donald, for example, is driven to explore the limits of his capacity to carve, cut, stack, and otherwise “build” with materials such as wood and his own body – to activate the “having been made” of a work of art for future viewers.⁸ In this way, he insistently poses questions about how we, as humans with bodies, navigate the objects and people around us. How do we fit in (or not)? How does our sense of who we are relate to our sense of other people, bodies, things? How do we *shape* ourselves? How can made objects, particularly those we call “art,” explore or even exacerbate these relationships?

Each of Donald’s projects and each of his individual objects or works examines aspects of these questions. From the whittled hybrid hand-sized objects, referencing guns, small pets, or misbegotten toys, of the *Wouldn’t* series to his *Would Work* performance, in which he laboriously hand built a bridge, supported only by its own cantilever spanning across the vast industrial gallery of Artspace in Sydney (both 2011),⁹ Donald’s art works hinge on our awareness of his making (or having made) the “material trace.” Both in its process and in its vestiges and marks, which are carved into or performatively enacted in and through otherwise obdurate materials, the material trace is the activating principle of Donald’s practice.

For example, in his contribution to *Material Traces* Donald has thus taken a stack of very ordinary 2 x 4s, purchased at Home Depot and stamped with the logos and specifications typical of mass-processed wood products, and shaped

8. Paul Donald is my partner and his moves to the UK and Canada were prompted by moves relating to my professional career. The very idea of *Material Traces* was inspired by living with him and witnessing his creative and intellectual processes.

9. Donald had every minute of his building activity documented on video and then each day had an additional video monitor added to the installation with the previous day’s footage until, by the end of the 9 day building process, the room was filled with 9 monitors and a cacophony of building (and eventually crashing) sounds

as he built and then rescued the bridge once it fell, around day 8. See the approximately 2 minute time-lapsed version of this footage on Donald’s website, accessed 24 November, 2012, http://paulcdonald.com/artwork2011_wouldwork.php.

their ends into knobs – like semi-flaccid penises, the handles of tools, or the grips of toy guns. The blankness of the banal stacks of wood, their refusal to speak creatively as “art,” is challenged by the limited, but powerful, chips and slices made by Donald’s labouring body. The art is in the “having been there” of this action, and these wooden 2 x 4s are now *animate*. They seem to want to tumble or squirm off their otherwise neat stack (mimicking the Home Depot display from which they came) and announce their creative ambition, but they remain mute – more or less, still stacks of wood, only partially afforded “hand-made” value.

The practice of Alicia Frankovich, who trained as a professional gymnast when she was young but (in her words) “never ‘made it,’” failing to complete her routine at the New Zealand 1992 National Championships, directly and insistently addresses the continuum between bodily effort and the “art” that may come from it.¹⁰ Frankovich plays with a range of performance modes as well as ways of documenting or retaining the “action” of the body for future viewers. With a hyper-awareness of her body, garnered in her gymnastic training, Frankovich has produced a range of works enacting the human body itself (usually her own, but sometimes including others) as *material*. In *Lungeing Chambon* (2009), for example, Frankovich enacted her body and the body of a curator in a choreographed situation involving two chairs tied and hanging in space. Her enactment was explicitly creative (signalled by her spatial wrestling with a curator) and intentional in a phenomenological sense of willing the body to act and thus joining thought with action (or, more specifically, what Maurice Merleau-Ponty called

10. Frankovich noted this “failure” in an email to me, 28 November 2012.

"incarnate intentionality"¹¹). In Frankovich's words, in *Lungeing Chambon*, "I... put pressure on the other participant in order to shift the dynamic between us," and the harness and chairs remain in the space as "traces" of these pressured activities between bodies.¹²

The work Frankovich produces for *Material Traces*, entitled *The opportune spectator* (the first version was completed in 2012) and performed differently according to each venue, is equally focused on exploring the dynamic among labouring bodies and also explicitly addresses *time*. What is the "time" of performance – marked by the efforts of performing bodies – and how do the traces of its action remain when the literal action is over? In asking such key questions, Frankovich expands the current global art world fascination with the question of how live art is addressed historically, and gives it a new conceptual twist.¹³ Often courting conflict or failure, Frankovich's work exemplifies the performative extreme of "material traces" – the literal enactment and recalling of the trace of bodily movement in its creative force, and the links between movement and agency, feeling, or socially inculcated habits. As later spectators we become part of, engaged with, these movements, traces, and the personal as well as interrelational – and so potentially social – significations and values they evoke.

The two artists working together as "The Two Gullivers," Flutura and Besnik Haxhillari, also work on this performative end of evoking material traces as central to their work. For the Gullivers, however, the performance is part of a continuum of making, begun by drawings that they see as "a kind of rehearsal for

11. On "incarnate intentionality," as derived from Merleau-Ponty's 1945, *Phenomenology of Perception*, see Monika Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1989), 40.

12. "Alicia Frankovich in Conversation with Francesca Boenzi," *Alicia Frankovich: Book of Works* (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien GmbH, 2011), 82. On Frankovich's embodied performances as courting failure, see Christopher Braddock, "Alicia Frankovich and the Force of Failure," in *Column 5*, ed.

Reuben Keehan (Sydney: Artspace, 2010), 8-15.

13. On this current interest, see Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, eds., *Perform Repeat Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol: Intellect Press, 2012).

performances” and expanded through performative actions (sometimes continuing the act of drawing within the performance), such that these images act as a means of materializing the traces of these actions, potentially *in advance* of the live act.¹⁴ In this way, drawing itself is put forth as a process, conceptually driven and intimately linked to live performance. Naming themselves after the ultimate traveller, Gulliver, these recent (since 2000) immigrants to Montreal from Albania (via a stint in Berlin) occupy various spaces and turn them into life/art situations.

For *Material Traces* the Gullivers contribute a series of watercolour and ink drawings, preparatory sketches for an installation and performances to take place at other locations in Montreal during the run of the show.¹⁵ Installing themselves, their children, and potentially friends and participants in a room with a giant red star shape (referring at least in part to the red of the Albanian flag) which can be disassembled into geometric parts, the Gullivers activate their drawings through *later* actions that follow on these “rehearsals.” The artists in this way interrogate the temporalities of making, viewing, and performance – which comes first in their performative mode of making: the picture, the (imagined then realized) action, or the viewing/participating that we bring to these various kinds of materialized trace? More than anything, with these ongoing performances and performance (or performative) drawings, in their words, the Two Gullivers attempt, in their words, to “activate the space between ourselves and the public, making it an intellectual and physical stimulant between the imaginary and the real, a path that can be followed in different ways, in fiction or

14. The Gullivers described this process to me in discussion 23 November 2012. They expanded on this comment by noting that they draw every day as part of their creative process and partly out of “suspense” as they build up to a public action, and also to negotiate their dual creative styles and sets of ideas: “we

[the two of us] have ideas,” Besnik notes, “but sometimes different ideas – [the drawings are also thus] a place of negotiation and translation.”

15. *Atelier Two Gullivers*, a series of performative workshops is presented at various locations in Montreal and Trois-Rivières throughout the exhibition.

reality, offering others the power to feel both here and elsewhere.”¹⁶ This is precisely the interest in creating a performative trace to spark in future viewers a sense of the lived experience of the work (its *having been made*) that underlies all the works in *Material Traces*.

Heather Cassils (born in Toronto, raised in Montreal, and currently working in Los Angeles) also explicitly makes use of performance and her own bodily action, often extreme (she is a personal trainer and body builder who, in her attempt to forge a hyper masculine body, considers herself transgendered or “gender queer”). For Cassils, bodily action is always explicitly related to a process of forging “material traces” that are then passed on to future viewers through photographic and video documentation. In her 2012-2013 project *Becoming an Image*, included through documentation here, she literalizes the force of the creative “material trace,” using her muscle-bound body over 45 exhausting minutes to cajole, manipulate, and beat into submission a recalcitrant mass – 1500 pounds of modelling clay – into a rectangular “statue.” Working in the pitch dark, she must hone her instincts, in her words, training to “understand...how to hit a target when you can’t see it.”¹⁷ Cassils has the process of making documented via processes (strobe-lit photography, producing only intermittent images, and a sound recording).

These documentary traces point to the limits of documentation but also to the limits of “live” experience itself in understanding the complexity of *making* and of creativity – the visitors at the event cannot see the entire process any more

16. Flutura & Besnik Haxhillari, “The Two Gullivers” (Toronto: Loop Gallery, Fall 2011). Artist statement for *Gulliver’s Rehearsal: Drawing into Performance*.

17. Cassils in an email to the author 27 November 2012.

than we can today looking at the documents of the event; in fact, they can *only* see when the flashbulb from the camera lights up the scene, and the afterimage of the flashed image of Cassils labouring remains their only “vision” in between photographic takes. The soundtrack has the potential to convey the relentless extremity of labor required by her body even when it cannot be seen in between strobe light flashes, including each moment of, as she puts it, her body’s “impact on the clay and my breath.”¹⁸ The *Material Traces* show includes photographs from the earlier 2012 Los Angeles version of *Becoming an Image*, to be supplemented by remnants from her performance during the 2013 “Edgy Women” festival, in Montreal (taking place during the exhibition). As with the Gullivers’ contribution, then, Cassils’ work has the potential to expand spatially as well as temporally over the duration of the exhibition, shifting its forms and even its performative referent (from the Los Angeles version in 2012 to that of Montreal in 2013).

While Cassils, like Frankovich and the Gullivers, plays with the impact and resonance on viewers of different levels of “trace” and embodiment – from the live experience of the event to the later documentations and traces – Christopher Braddock produces work that even more explicitly comments on the relay between the body in action and the representations that ensue. And Juliana Cerquiera Leite performs sculpture-producing actions on mould-able materials but only lets us see the final material form. Braddock’s 2007-2013 *Take* series is exhibited alongside his projected video *Above*, 2007, which depicts his naked

18. *Ibid.*

body, crouching and from behind, laboring to produce what we imagine must be some of the hand- and body-moulded lumps of now hardened epoxy clay arrayed on the adjacent table. We are suspended between the past action and present forms – suspended in an awareness of the temporality of making, and of our own experience of viewing (and potentially handling, as the objects are available to be held) as belated. Braddock continues to make objects for the *Take* series, opening up as well an ambiguity as to which he was presumably making in the video and which might have come later – the temporality of making and holding is spun out such that the video itself begins to act as “origin” point for the objects.

Leite’s large sculptural form, *the climb is also the fall* (2011), offers us dramatic surfaces, hollows, and expanses apparently moulded through direct bodily imprint – apparently shaped by the voids produced by her body rotating downward or tumbling, as if carving space like a dancer, but one in free fall. We are literally *impressed* in turn by these marks of “having been made.” This monumental latex object, as dynamic as a moving body guided by the spatially active forms of a spiral staircase, presents (or does it re-present?) Leite’s body, which had to have been “there,” moving in space, for this corporeally moulded form to have been constructed and then exhibited for us “here” as a “material trace.”

These projects by Cassils, Braddock, and Leite, then, comment upon the tension of bodily action – specifically as it then calls forth reactions in future viewers – as set forth in what we might understand as a range of “live,” semi-live (video-taped), or creatively “re-presented” situations. The artists in the show working

with paint equally find interesting and complex ways to activate the process of making through the work. The standard, and crucial, modernist and postmodernist trope of using thick paint to magnify and then solidify the traces of painterly action has long been established and this kind of gestural abstraction, as suggested above, was linked to male painterly prowess in art discourses addressing Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s.¹⁹ Angel Vergara, Andrew Dadson (from Vancouver), and Mark Igloliorte (from Nunatsiavut territory, Labrador, and living in New Brunswick) explore aspects of painting and gesture, moving far beyond the tropes of “expressiveness” that bogged down earlier discourses about painting. Rather than mining the power of the painterly gesture to evoke the trace of a gendered painting body (a “male genius”), however, these artists explore the relationship of the act of painting (and its remaining traces) to time-based media (Vergara), use paint more overtly as material (Dadson), or explore its capacity to render perceptual nuances central to the problem of representation (Igloliorte).

Vergara’s complex *FEUILLETON* project at the 2011 Venice Biennale, addressing the theme of the seven deadly sins, thus directly forged a visual interface between video and painting to examine painting as a potentially ongoing act (yet one, in this case, forever suspended in the past/present time of video projection).²⁰ Drawn from *FEUILLETON*, which occupied the entire Belgian pavilion and was curated by Belgian artist Luc Tuymans, Vergara’s installation in *Material Traces* is entitled *FEUILLETON Berlusconi Pasolini 2011*. As with the larger project, Vergara makes the act of painting one aspect of the videotaped action, overlaying the

19. See Sidney Geist’s description of Willem de Kooning’s abstracted “woman” paintings: “[i]n a gesture that parallels a sexual act, he [de Kooning] had vented himself on the canvas,” in “Work in Progress,” *Art Digest* 27 (April 1, 1953), 15. This connection has been critiqued from a feminist point of view by art historians such

as Carol Duncan but also by important artists such as Elaine de Kooning, Mira Schor, Joan Semmel, and Jenny Saville – all of whom use the overtly painterly gesture to render and, arguably, to “embody” feminist themes through clearly manipulated, thickened swaths of paint.

20. A full description of the pavilion can be found in Luc Tuymans, “Belgium/*Feuilleton*,” *Illuminations*, catalogue of the Biennale (Venice: Venice Biennale, 2011), 328–9. Contemplating the original installation, interesting questions of *whose agency* are at play in the painting hand arise, since Vergara (according

images of his hand painting with projected dual video images covering one wall. The wall of video is interrupted by a small monitor in the center, which acts as a hole or window in the larger field. The footage on the wall appears to be taken from television news, and sometimes slows down or repeats a kind of dream-like loop (one striking segment shows "Italian Prime Minister Punched," according to the by-line, all rendered in painful slow motion as Vergara's hand paints over the screen as if attempting to capture in paint, and freeze, the moving, bloodied, face of then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi). Meanwhile the monitor in the center of this screen depicts a more bucolic scene, a televised landscape cutting to Italian avant-garde filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini (a widely respected intellectual until his death in 1975, Pasolini represents an earlier era of Italian culture and perhaps the farthest opposite extreme from Berlusconi among Italian celebrities) talking on a beach – with Vergara's hand suddenly visible on top, slicing into our visual field and marking out the chasm between "televisual" and "actual" action.

But of course the hand painting is itself "televisual" by the time it reaches us here, now, in the gallery. We are immersed in, yet distanced from this dance of there and then, here and now, filmed and actual, none of it materially present in our space and time yet all of it in some way tracing a past materiality rendered here through the illusionistic magic of layers of video imagery. As Tuymans puts it in describing the larger version of this work, "the [media] images appropriated by the artist are projected over and over again before finally being attacked by the paintbrush and paint, as if highlighting the powerlessness of this very ges-

to Tuymans) was the one who chose Tuymans to "curate" his contribution; see p. 328.

ture... creating a sort of phantom reality."²¹ Either way, we cannot avoid some awareness of this past act of making and the present act of engaging the trace.

Andrew Dadson's "lean paintings" in contrast exert a muscular physicality. They involve his studied use of the painting support as an object against which to scrape wads of paint, thereby forming a new object (strategically leaned against the wall rather than hung to stress its object status and distance it from being viewed as a "picture" or illustration). The paint extrudes in huge, sensually evocative blobs at the top of the leaning slab – the visceral, viscous quality of oil paint frozen into congealed, colored lumps (like clay), marks of the action of his arm having pushed the paint to one end of the canvas.

While Dadson makes us aware of process by exposing the scraped surface, which reveals his past effort, Mark Igloiorte evokes the "having been made" in a completely different way: in his recent series of painted diptychs of identical things from different points of view, his evocation is more conceptual (yet clearly "painterly"). Here, Henri Bergson's philosophical arguments about perception and memory are useful in coming to an understanding of how Igloiorte's diptych images affect us psychologically and potentially emotionally: perception is the means "whereby we place ourselves in the very heart of things.... we cannot say where perception ends and memory begins. At that precise moment, memory, instead of capriciously sending in and calling back its images, follows regularly, in all their details, the movements of the body."²² Even something as simple as repeating the most banal images – two sneakers on the floor next to a mirror; a

21. *Ibid.*

22. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire* (1896). Fifth edition (1908) translated by Nancy Margret Paul and W. Scott Palmer as *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 67 and 106.

trashcan with a twisted red cloth on top – calls forth the fallibility and contingency of perception, *both of the making subject and of us, the later viewers*. In this way, and also through his sensual use of paint (even, again, to render the most everyday things), Igloliorte draws us into a relationship with his own memory and perception, and points to the making of art as, indeed, the re-presentation of this earlier moment of encounter.²³

Igloliorte's project echoes strongly with some of Francis Alÿs' modest painting projects exploring similar issues, such as his ongoing series (started in 1996) *Le Temps du sommeil*, which exploit the capacity of painting to act as a memorializing vehicle for bodily action and the expression of remembered states. Alÿs' practice in all of its myriad hybrid forms (including painting, photography, video, performance, and combinations of all of these) explores process and the dialogic relations between the making subject, the things or events that he makes, and his audience. In the work included here, his single channel video *Painting/Retouche* (2008), for example, we see the artist laboriously paint (or repaint) the lines in the middle of a road in Panama. The process of *painting* is narratively recreated through the process of *video*, such that we are placed imaginatively "with" the artist as he performs a mundane task that crosses over "art" with painting as everyday task. Alÿs is a master of suspending us in moments of durational identification with his making/depicted body, as here.

Alex Monteith, also uses video, in her case to push the medium to an ontological extreme by mining its capacity to document the movement of bodies and

23. Igloliorte noted to me that displacement resonates in a personal way for him in that his family history is one of disjuncture (common to Aboriginal people living in North America): his father, raised speaking only Inuktitut, was removed from his family and local community and sent to one of the notorious

residential schools set up by the Canadian government (in an email from 26 November 2012).

objects through time and space. In one 2010 work, for example, she worked with the New Zealand air force, flying with them and mounting cameras on the military helicopters to capture movement at its most dizzying and extreme. In the slightly earlier work included here, *Passing Manoeuvre with Two Motorcycles and 584 Vehicles for Two-Channel Video Installation* (2008),²⁴ she projects the digital video footage taken by cameras mounted on two motorcycles speeding through traffic on a New Zealand motorway, in what she calls “semi-illegal commuter lane split[ting].”²⁵ One camera films the back of the motorcycle in front of it from the one behind it; the one in front films the motorcycle behind it; the uncut footage from these two cameras is played side by side, from start to finish, documenting in real time this 18 kilometer-long daredevil stunt. As with the *Igloliorte* series, perceptual issues are emphasized: the point of view of each camera is exaggeratedly insistent – one could say each camera/rider authors the content of the video image generated through the rider’s movement.²⁶ This split authorial effect foregrounds the capacity of video to document action over time and space, while inevitably leaving out anything peripheral to the purview of the camera’s “eye” as well as of its audio recording component. The dual projection (the recreation in our space and time, here and now) is accompanied by the adrenaline-releasing, stereophonically rendered clamor of the motorcycles – a Ducati 996s in front, driven by Monteith, and a Suzuki GSXR 600 behind, driven by motorcycle racer (and professional nurse) Jill Clendon. As viewers (we are situated in the future of their action), we are immersed in the installation, surrounded, even engulfed, by

24. An earlier version of this work, performed with a different motorcycle-rider, was called *996cctv: Passing Maneuver for Two Motorcycles and 749 Motor Vehicles* (2007).

25. Accessed 26 November 2012, http://www.alexmonteith.com/work_detail.php?id=53.

26. Monteith made this point to me in an email from 30 November 2012.

a vertiginous visual and aural embrace of pure speed and motion – two kick-ass women catapulting at terrifying speeds down an Auckland freeway dodging cars in between lanes.

■ If the video image has the capacity to capture rapid human/machine movement through time and space and convey it at a later time, and the stereo sound can evoke on a primitive level the power of machines to propel human bodies, the viewer, surrounded by technologically assisted motion and sound, remains a motionless anchor engulfed by movement. We are still, watching; we are the pivotal point of the gaze (and of the “hearing”), aware that in fact the video itself doesn’t “move” but narrates movement that took place (as did the making of the art work) *in the past*. We are aware that the original apparatus was moving, in concert with the mechanical motorbike and the body guiding it as it plummeted full-speed down the motorway. We are thus caught in an extreme state of suspension between the making/doing of the past and apprehension in the present (the future tense of the video’s having been made). As technologies shift and become outmoded – for example, in the distant future there may be no Ducatis on the road (or there may be no oil to propel any old-fashioned gas-driven vehicles), or there may be no such thing as projected digital video – viewers/experiencers might be all the more aware of the vicissitudes of time and place in the production of (artistic) meaning.

Such concerns are articulated in dramatically different ways by a final group of artists whose work is included in *Material Traces*, and who persistently explore

materials that in fact are already "outmoded," but still central to many things humans do and to the environments we shape for ourselves. Tricia Middleton and Alexandre David, like Paul Donald, all foreground the manipulation of mass produced yet also sometimes "natural" *materials* such as plywood or found objects to create three dimensional works or situations that compel visitors to an awareness not only of our embodied experience of often large-scale works, as well as of the body that made the work in the past. Middleton and David produce installations – albeit at opposite ends of sensory experience – that nonetheless both evoke sensual experience in the viewer by recalling through their obviously "made" quality the actions of artistic agency in the past and call forth acts of perception and potential action in the present time of viewing.

Middleton's "Crones," reworked for *Material Traces* out of repurposed materials and ideas, first appeared in 2012 at Oakville Galleries in Ontario, where they were part of a multi-part installation filling the charming spaces of this early twentieth-century house (the show as a whole was entitled *Form is the Destroyer of Force, Without Severity There Will be No Mercy*). For this version, Middleton reuses the concept but also materials from this and other installations, producing a psychologically charged experience. We are positioned among these evocative and creepy old ladies, made of fragments of "mountains" from an earlier installation called *Dark Souls*, including rocks and branches, as well as used domestic objects and studio detritus. Drawn to but also repelled by their somewhat seedy glamour and ostentatious decrepitude, we are also made aware of how materi-

als such as found objects and bits and pieces of natural and unnatural worlds (sticks, grass, bottles, paint, wax, and yarn) respond to human fashioning and refashioning as well as of the inevitable degradation of materiality over the stretches of time.

We are immersed in Middleton's environments, which echo the activity of her creative reimagining of these normally incompatible materials – many of them foreign to conventional art works. The installations make us hauntingly aware of the fact that their time of having been made is ever receding into the past, even as crones symbolize the inexorable aging of women's bodies over time.... A heavy sense of mortality colors the experience of the crones, reminding us that art can only ever be a temporary means of slowing down time by crystallizing acts of making in objects that have heightened value in our culture of consumption. In the end, all consumption turns all materials into detritus and ashes, and all returns to earth.

In contrast, and bringing us back to the hand/wood connectivity of Paul Donald's work, Alexandre David creates a quieter, more subtle relationship between making and future (or, as it were, our "present") experience, producing large-scale plywood structures that only indirectly remind us of their process of fabrication – and more dramatically solicit social relations and responses in their modes of installation. David is known for making works that can be wheeled out into public spaces, and are constructed explicitly to encourage people to sit and engage with both the solidity and materiality of the work (thus indirectly with

the artist who engineered these forms) and each other. A relay is proposed and these public works recall the insistent politics driving structures of relationality in works by artists working with scale, materials, and different publics in the 1960s and 1970s: David's work recalls the phenomenological concerns of minimalist, land, and process art as well as the explicit activism motivating performance and body-oriented practices by artists from Allan Kaprow to Suzanne Lacy. Adapting his work to a range of differently scaled public and private cultural spaces, David provides possibilities for interaction that are potentially infinite.

In the context of *Material Traces*, David's work intervenes in a little-used sliver of space in the gallery, activating it and making it come alive through the bodies of visitors, who are siphoned through to a calming empty box, rendering this tiny "room" a public space within the gallery. David's construction – like all the projects exhibited in *Material Traces* – reminds us that materiality in the context of art is not just about handwork, though it is always connected viscerally to an original, creative, incarnate intentionality. It is also about evoking and encouraging bodily responses and the possibility for specific social engagements, and thus reminds us that the artist is one among a circuit of agencies activating what we call "art" and giving it meaning in the world.

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A.J.

FRANCIS ALÿS
Painting/Retoque
Ex-US Panama Canal Zone,
2008
Video documentation of
an action
8 min. 28 sec.
Courtesy of the artist
and David Zwirner,
New York / London

CHRISTOPHER BRADDOCK
Take series, 2007-2013
Epoxy clay

Above, 2007
Video
28 min
Courtesy of the artist

HEATHER CASSILS
Becoming an Image, 2012
Photo documentation
of performance, clay
Photo: Heather Cassils and
Eric Charles
Courtesy of Ronald Feldman
Fine Arts, New York

JULIANA CERQUEIRA LEITE
the climb is also the fall, 2011
Silicone rubber, fiberglass,
plastic, metal
Courtesy of the artist

ANDREW DADSON
White Plank Painting, 2010
Oil on canvas
Collection of Shabin Mohamed,
Toronto

ALEXANDRE DAVID
Untitled, 2013
In situ installation
Plywood
Courtesy of the artist

PAUL DONALD
Untitled (studs), 2012
Pine
Courtesy of the artist

ALICIA FRANKOVICH
The opportune spectator,
2012-2013
Video documentation
of a performance
Courtesy of the artist

FLUTURA & BESNIK HAXHILLARI
(THE TWO GULLIVERS)
Star's Anatomy series, 2011-
Watercolour and ink on paper
Courtesy of the artists

MARK IGLIORTE
Untitled, from the series
Observational Diptychs, 2010
Oil on phone book page
Courtesy of the artist and
Donald Browne Gallery,
Montreal

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Courtesy of the artist and
Donald Browne Gallery,
Montreal

Untitled, from the series
Observational Diptychs, 2010
Oil on phone book page
Collection of Jean Pitre and
Claude Leclerc, Saint-Lambert

Untitled, from the series
Observational Diptychs, 2010
Oil on phone book page
Collection Landriault-Paradis,
Montreal

TRICIA MIDDLETON
Crones, 2013
Excerpted from *Form is the*
Destroyer of Force, Without
Severity There Can Be No Mercy,
2012-2013
Installation
Wax, fabric, paint, found object,
dust, glitter
Courtesy of the artist

ALEX MONTEITH
Passing Manoeuvre with
Two Motorcycles and 584
Vehicles for Two-Channel
Video Installation, 2008
Two channel video
projection, sound
13 min. 38 sec.
Courtesy of the artist

ANGEL VERGARA
FEUILLETON Berlusconi
Pasolini, 2011
Three channel video
installation, sound
Courtesy of the artist
and Amine Rech Gallery,
Brussels / Paris



galerie **leonard
& bina
ellen**
art gallery

